

# **What Makes a Good Life?**

## **An Oral Historical Analysis of the United States’ Economic Model of Schooling in Relation to Perceived Quality of Life.**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper, through the use of oral history, examines a demographically diverse group of participants’ perceptions of what constitutes a quality life, and whether their perceptions match the current economics-based quality of life focus of schooling in the United States. Seven major themes related to perceived quality of life were developed through the coding of nine participants’ oral history interviews. Each participant viewed his or her own quality of life as good or better, and as such, having a positive relationship to each theme can be viewed as contributing to a high quality of life, while having a negative relationship to a theme can be viewed as hampering a high quality of life. The seven themes, listed in order of their strength and importance in relation to quality of life, are Interpersonal Relationships, Engagement, Adversity, Internal Motivation/Personality, Financial Security, Occupational Identity and Faith, though Internal Motivation/Personality and Faith will not be discussed in this paper because of the difficulties in relating them to education policy. What is clear from the findings is that while economic and financial considerations are perceived as important to achieving a high quality of life, other considerations, namely social and psychological well-being, are of a greater importance. These findings call into question the United States’ economics-based quality of life focus on schooling, and discusses the potential for policy changes that incorporate a more well-rounded approach to schooling.

To some degree, schooling in the United States has always been linked to our nation's need to create and maintain a strong economy. In an ever-growing fashion, however, the curriculum taught in schools today is geared toward increasing personal and societal economic gains. The assumed benefit of improving an individual or a society's economic standing is that it will improve the quality of life of the individual and the society in which the individual resides. The shift in schools toward stringent accountability measures that are increasingly curriculum-centered, and conversely, decreasingly centered on the needs of the student, is done under the proposition that we, as a nation, need to improve scholastic performance broadly, and specifically in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields, so that we can compete and excel in the burgeoning, global innovation economy. And while maintaining and even improving personal and societal financial wealth seems a reasonable endeavor for our republic, the question remains, should it be the main focus of our educational system? Indeed, Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2006) sees this as one of the three great worries of our educational system as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She states:

In the United States, we have seen a growing assumption that the primary purpose of public education...is to produce a workforce that will meet the changing demands of an increasingly competitive, global, and knowledge-based society. A narrow focus on producing the nation's workforce has pushed out other traditional goals of teacher education chief among them the goal of producing teachers who know how to prepare future citizens to participate in a democratic society. (p. 24)

Nel Noddings (2003), extends this point:

Often [in today's schools] we equate happiness with financial success, and then we suppose that our chief duty as educators is to give all children the tools needed to get "good" jobs. However, many essential jobs, now very poorly paid, will have to be done even if the entire citizenry were to become well educated. (p. 22-23)

The purpose of this research paper is to examine what the perceived role of economics and economic considerations is in achieving a high quality of life and to see if the United States' economically focused model of formal schooling matches individual's perceptions of a high quality of life. The next section will briefly describe the methodology used for this paper. That will be followed by a review of the historical context for this

paper, establishing the United States' economic model of schooling. The final two sections will cover the narrative of findings on perceived quality of life themes, and then a discussion of the findings in relation to the economic model of schooling, Lane's construct of quality of life and Noddings' construct for educating the whole child.

## **Methodology**

This research paper is based on a portion of the findings of a much larger oral history investigation examining the relationship between educational attainment and quality of life. Oral history was chosen for this study as it was the best way to facilitate the level of in-depth information needed to fully examine the relationship between educational attainment and quality of life and confront the economic model of schooling in its historical context.

To understand oral history as a research method and why it was chosen for this study, one must understand the unique purpose behind undertaking an oral history project. This can be difficult because of the similarities it shares with traditional history. For example, all "historical research is the systemic collection and evaluation of data related to past occurrences for the purpose of describing causes, effects, or trends of those events. It helps to explain current events and to anticipate future ones (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 166)." Unlike traditional history, which mainly engages in an extensive literature review ('literature' used here can mean documents, books, pamphlets, recordings, movies, photographs and other artifacts (Gay & Airasian, 2003)) oral history, through the use of extensive interviewing in combination with that in-depth literature review, is able to reveal a depth of understanding that is not possible by only examining traditional historical artifacts. As Yow (2005) points out, "Oral history testimony is the kind of information that makes other public documents understandable (p.11)." It does this by exploring the rationale and the processes that go into the making of a decision. To this effect, oral history is attempting to understand the 'why' behind the 'what.' Traditional history is also attempting this level of understanding, but it cannot attain the level of personal understanding that oral history does because there is a psychological intimacy that is created in an interview, and can be examined by the researcher. Even with the most personal of

written correspondence this intimacy is impossible, and the traditional historian is at a disadvantage.

There is an additional rationale for undertaking an oral history project, and that is that oral history is able to reach research topics unavailable to traditional history because much of our history is not written down. Again, Yow (2005) states, “Oral history reveals daily life at home and at work—the very stuff that rarely gets into any kind of public record (p. 12).” This type of account helps to put all of life’s events, both big and small, into perspective, and makes it *possible* to understand at least part of what is important in an individual’s life. And while these accounts may not be fully generalizable to the public at large, if done well, they can be strongly anecdotal.

For this study extensive interviewing of nine participants who vary demographically based on age, educational attainment, gender, race, religion and socioeconomic status was utilized to examine how these participants perceived quality of life. While demographic diversity was an important element in determining participants for this study, the only fixed variables that are incorporated were having a participant’s educational attainment commensurate to his or her occupational attainment as this would assist in confronting the presuppositions of the economic model of schooling. To achieve this, I used a combination of quota selection sampling and snowball sampling to find the participants listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants Demographics Table

Participant Name	Race	Gender	Age	Educational Attainment	Occupation(s)
April Morgenthal	White	Female	27	Master’s Degree	Teacher of deaf education
Brian Hellman	White	Male	45	Associate’s Degree	Industrial Automation Distributor
Cheryl McDonald	African American	Female	40s	Some College	Executive Secretary
David Levy	White	Male	27	Juris Doctorate	Lawyer
Francine Nelms	African American	Female	48	Some High School	Janitorial, dry cleaning, factory, Meals on Wheel
Gayle Jones	African American	Female	50	GED	Unemployed; on disability
Hadley Bowling	White	Female	30	Bachelor’s Degree	Engineer

Participant Name	Race	Gender	Age	Educational Attainment	Occupation(s)
Jonas Thom	White	Male	38	Master's Degree	Consultant and Trainer in Mental Health
Louise Spiegel	White	Female	85	Some Graduate School	Social Activist

Participants were interviewed two times with each interview lasting approximately one hour. In general, the questions of the first interview consisted of demographic information, early life memories and discussions of schooling, family experiences, and other elements of childhood. The second interview dealt predominantly with adult experiences in relationships, jobs and other elements of the participant's life and then some 'philosophical' questions concerning how they perceive their quality of life, what the most important contributing factors are to that quality of life, and what role learning has played in relation to that quality of life.

In addition to the interviewing, all material was transcribed and the content of the interviews was checked for reliability and validity. All of the interviews proved sufficiently reliable and valid to be included in this study. I then, using line by line coding, coded all of the interviews by hand and using NVivo software. Through this process 37 potential themes were identified. These potential themes were then further examined for frequency of occurrence and relationship to other potential themes, after which each potential theme was either deleted from consideration, combined with other themes to create a more all-encompassing theme or left as is. All told, seven major themes were uncovered in relation to perceived quality of life. These will be discussed in the results section of this paper.

#### Historical Context: The Economic Model of Schooling

Education in the United States has always had several purposes for its citizenry with one of those purposes being the economic prosperity (or subjugation) for both the individual and society. The concern presented and examined in this section is whether or not economic concerns have become the dominant source for educational policy and curricular changes in the United States' recent past and into its present and future. The conclusions drawn from this section will serve as the foundational context for this study, and its examination of quality of life. This section briefly describes major eras of education and education reform in the United States, with an eye toward the role economics played in policy

decisions during these eras. Topics include the Common School Movement, the Industrial Revolution, the GI Bill and the Cold War, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), *A Nation at Risk*, Goals 2000, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the current policy proposals under President Obama.

The Common School Movement's origins can be traced to Thomas Jefferson and the dawn of the United States. Though Jefferson was in no way alone in championing the principles of the common school, it was his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, drafted as a member of the Virginia Assembly's Committee to Revise the Laws of the Commonwealth, that served as the first piece of legislation promoting the common school (McNergney & Herbert, 1998). This bill called for schools that were tax-supported, open to boys and girls, free for up to three years, and would teach reading, writing, arithmetic and history. In addition the bill called for the construction of grammar schools, like those discussed earlier, that would teach the more advanced students (McNergney & Herbert, 1998). In 1818, decades after this first bill, Jefferson continued the common school fight while addressing its purpose, writing in his *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia*, "'objects of primary education" such qualities as morals, understanding of duties to neighbors and country, knowledge of rights, and intelligence and faithfulness in social relations (Noddings, 2005, p. 10)." Broadly speaking, common school reformers called for taxation for public education, longer school terms, a focus on getting particular groups of nonattenders into schools, hierarchical school organizations, consolidation of small school districts into larger ones for the purpose of lowering per pupil expenditure, standardization of methods and curriculum and teacher training (Kaestle, 1983 in McNergney & Herbert, 1998). Amazingly, these are many of the major issues still confronting educational reformers and policymakers.

While the above details what common school reformers wanted for their schools, it only alludes to the potential rationale(s) behind this movement. In the years following Jefferson's death, Horace Mann took up the cause of common schools and became their guiding force. Indeed, Mann, as Spring (2005) put it, and "[t]hose who created and spread the ideology of the common school worked with as much fervor as leaders of religious crusades. And, in fact, there are striking parallels between the two types of campaigns. Both promised some form of salvation and moral reformation. In the case of the common school, the promise was the

salvation of society (p. 77).” This “salvation of society,” Spring argues, contained three distinctive features. The first, was the educating of all children in the same schoolhouse. Spring (2005) states:

It was argued that if children from a variety of religious, social-class, and ethnic backgrounds were educated in common, there would be a decline in hostility and friction among social groups. In addition, if children educated in common were taught a common social and political ideology, a decrease in political conflict and social problems would result. (p. 74)

The second distinctive feature was the idea of using schools as instruments of government policy, and the third was the creation of state agencies to control local schools (Spring, 2005). The third distinctive feature may have occurred out of necessity in seeing the first two through to fruition, but it is through the beliefs behind the first two that we can see the overriding purpose behind the common school movement.

In the early 19th Century, the United States was a very young and fragile nation. Education was viewed as a means of spreading the belief system underlying our republic and for creating a sense of national pride. This was attempted during the colonial era, but was secondary to the importance of religion. Religion and morality were still important in this new school movement, but not as important as strengthening and maintaining this tenuous *common* bond formed between an ethnically, racially, religiously and economically diverse, and geographically spreading, citizenry (McNergney & Herbert, 1998; Spring, 2005).

Now, creating a sense of nation was not the only rationale behind Mann and others pushing of common schools. Mann also believed that creating a common bond between the citizenry would improve relations between capital and labor, first through eliminating the friction caused by class consciousness and second by increasing the general wealth of society. Spring (2005) states:

Mann felt that common schooling, by improving the general wealth of society, would be the answer to those reformers who were calling for a redistribution of property from the rich to the poor. His argument is one of the earliest considerations of schooling as capital investment and of teaching as the development of human capital. Within his framework of reasoning, education would produce wealth by training intelligence to develop new technology and methods of production. Investment in education is a form of capital investment because it leads to the production of new wealth and teaching is a means of developing human

capital because it provides the individual with the intellectual tools for improved labor. (p. 82)

It can be argued that Mann and other common school advocates never achieved this lofty unity, and it can also be argued that common schools in actuality had the exact opposite effect on class consciousness (see Katz, 1968). Regardless, long after the common school movement came to an end, many of its pillars, especially the economic link between intellectual development and capital growth, remained constants in the public school system. Over time, this economic component would become more and more the driving force of educational reform as educating for democracy and educating for religion were cast aside. This transition can be seen during industrialization.

Toward the end of the 19th Century the United States embarked on an era of unprecedented industrialization. Factories extracting natural resources and others manufacturing and distributing a wide-range of new products popped up throughout the Rust Belt and in urban centers across the country. More workers and more nuanced skills were needed to drive this new economic engine of the United States. This led to a push to increase the focus of education into practical, vocational applications and to find ways to get a broader demographic spectrum of workers into the factories (Anyon, 2005). On these points, Spring (2005), summarizing Katz (see Katz, M., 1968), demonstrating the shift from common school ideal to education for industrialization, states:

Within the context of these events, upper-class reformers were seeking to ensure that they would benefit from these changes by imposing a common school system that would train workers for the new factories, educate immigrants into acceptance of values supportive of the ruling elite, and provide order and stability among the expanding populations of the cities. (p. 94)

In addition to inculcating skill sets and belief systems on citizens through education, efforts were also made to increase the workforce in novel ways. Preschools have their American birth in the factory-system. Factory owner Robert Owen started the first one in the United States at a factory so that mothers could come to work and not have to worry about child care and to prepare children who were too young to start working (there were no child labor laws at this point, so children started working at very young ages) for their futures working in the factories (McNergney & Herbert, 1998). These preschools were not the nurturing environments



that we think of today when we think of preschools. Indeed, most schools, particularly urban public schools, were uncomfortable and filthy and with teachers who were severe in their methods of discipline (McNergney & Herbert, 1998).

These conditions would not last for too long as a wave of progressive social reform swept the nation. On the industrial front, child labor laws and sanitation laws were implemented. Women fought for and received the right to vote. And in education, efforts were made to upset the path that current education practices led its students down. The focus of education, while still contributing to personal and societal economic solvency, broadened once again to some of the calls of the Common School Movement and to some new areas as well. Noddings (2005) notes, by way of an example, that:

[T]he National Education Association listed seven aims in its 1918 report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*: (1) health; (2) command of the fundamental processes; (3) worthy home membership; (4) vocation; (5) citizenship; (6) worthy use of leisure; and (7) ethical character. (p. 10)

These types of aims continued to be the driving force behind education for the next few decades. This is not to say that ‘factory schools’ were not still in existence and that were not still deplorable conditions in some urban schools, but that at least at the policy level the focus had shifted. New wrinkles to these aims emerged after World War II and into the Cold War era.

After the end of World War II, a major shift occurred in educational policymaking and in the aims attributed to public education. The shift in policymaking came in the form of increased federal involvement in funding (Carpentier, 2006) and on issues of curriculum (Spring, 2005). The reasons for these shifts were due in large part to the fear of the spread of Communism and the power struggle for global superiority between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War and the space race. Spring (2005) summarizes his interpretation of these shifts laid out in his *The Sorting Machine: National Educational Policy since 1945* from 1976:

The interpretation given in *The Sorting Machine* stresses the expanded role of the corporate liberal state in the management of human resources. Within the framework of this interpretation, selective service, the NSF [National Science Foundation], the NDEA [National Defense Education

Act], and the War on Poverty are considered part of the general trend in the twentieth century to use the school as a means of cultivating human resources for the benefit of industrial and corporate leaders. This interpretation recognizes the problems and failures of the schools in achieving these goals and the evolving complexity of political relationships in the educational community. Spring's major criticism of educational events is that schools were increasingly used to serve national economic and foreign policies and, as a result, failed to prepare students to protect their political, social, and economic rights. (p. 376)

As Spring points out, this is one interpretation of educational policy during this era. It is also important to note that the Civil Rights Movement and court decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that called for an end to 'separate, but equal' practices would also factor into education policy decisions. Indeed, Spring, notes that the main opposing interpretation comes from neoconservative scholar, Diane Ravitch (1983, in Spring, 2005) who stated, "At every level of formal education, from nursery school to graduate school, equal opportunity became the overriding goal of postwar educational reformers (p. 376)" and that the needs of industry and foreign policy were not involved in education policy decisions. Ravitch brings a negative connotation to this "overriding goal" of equal opportunity, but regardless if one accepts that element of her argument it is difficult to say that at least a portion of what drove policy decisions for at least some policymakers was progressive social and educational equity. In addition, one can also confront Spring's characterization of the economic educational focus being increasingly used to benefit national economic needs. This may be true, and as Carpentier (2006) points out, "After 1945, growth in public expenditure on education and economic growth went hand in hand (p. 705)," but it should also at least be addressed that increased national economic wealth is perceived by some to benefit individual economic wealth, which in turn improves the quality of one's life. Ultimately, Spring's interpretation rings largely true for this researcher with the couple of stated caveats. As we enter the modern era of education policy this focus on economics continues to grow and that other once prominent components of education policy like, religion, democracy, equal opportunity and even national pride take a backseat to competition in the global marketplace.

As Ronald Reagan took over the presidency in 1980, the Republican Party had two vocal segments on how schooling should be approached in the United States. Reagan sought the support of the

religious right by supporting a school prayer amendment, educational choice, a “restoration of moral values” in public schools, cutting federal support for bilingual education, abolishing the Department of Education and generally limiting federal involvement in educational practices. Ultimately, however, Reagan, without completely abandoning the religious right, chose to formulate his policy decisions more in line with the fiscally conservative Republicans. His rationale for doing this came from the findings of reports, most notably the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* from 1983 (Apple, 1988; Spring, 2005). This report makes its message clear:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being taken over by competitors throughout the world...[The] educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (NCEE, 1983, p. 5 in Apple, 1986, p. 199-200)

The language of education reform is clearly in the language of economics, and the repercussions are clear, if we do not improve education with the purpose of furnishing the needs of our economy, our nation will fail.

With such economic factors in education being endorsed by major educational reports and by President Reagan, the religious right found it useful to join forces with fiscal conservatives, as membership in one group certainly did not exclude membership in the other. As Apple (1986) points out, four key agenda items were undertaken by this new coalition:

- 1) proposals for voucher plans and tax credits to make schools more like the idealized free-market economy;
- 2) the movement in state legislatures throughout the country to “raise standards” and mandate both teacher and student “competencies” and basic curricular goals and knowledge;
- 3) the increasingly effective attacks on the school curriculum for its anti-family and anti-free enterprise bias, its “secular humanism,” and its lack of patriotism; and
- 4) the growing pressure to make the needs of business and industry into the primary goals of the school. (p. 198)

This plan for educational reform ultimately led to a transformative change in the aims of education. “No longer is education seen as part of a social alliance that combines many minority groups, women, teachers, administrators, government officials, and progressively inclined legislators, all of whom acted together to propose social democratic policies for schools,” as Spring (1988) states, but instead, “it aims at providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing profit and capital accumulation and for returning us to a romanticized past of the ‘ideal’ home, family, and school (p. 283).” This path of educational reform continues with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was one of the first major pieces of legislation passed by President George W. Bush, and demonstrated his attempt to replicate the type of educational advancements<sup>1</sup> achieved during his time as governor of Texas (Hursh, 2007). NCLB has four pillars that represent its ideological purpose:

*No Child Left Behind* is based on stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states and communities, proven education methods, and more choices for parents.

### **Stronger Accountability for Results**

Under *No Child Left Behind*, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Annual state and school district report cards inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run.

### **More Freedom for States and Communities**

Under *No Child Left Behind*, states and school districts have unprecedented flexibility in how they use federal education funds. For

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<sup>1</sup> These ‘advancements’ out of Texas are, of course, greatly disputed, just as the perceived benefits of NCLB have been widely scrutinized. While a discussion of these topics is valuable, the purpose of this section is to look at ideological underpinnings of educational policies, not to get bogged down with issues of implementation.

example, it is possible for most school districts to transfer up to 50 percent of the federal formula grant funds they receive under the Improving Teacher Quality State Grants, Educational Technology, Innovative Programs, and Safe and Drug-Free Schools programs to any one of these programs, or to their Title I program, without separate approval. This allows districts to use funds for their particular needs, such as hiring new teachers, increasing teacher pay, and improving teacher training and professional development.

### **Proven Education Methods**

*No Child Left Behind* puts emphasis on determining which educational programs and practices have been proven effective through rigorous scientific research. Federal funding is targeted to support these programs and teaching methods that work to improve student learning and achievement. In reading, for example, *No Child Left Behind* supports scientifically based instruction programs in the early grades under the Reading First program and in preschool under the Early Reading First program.

### **More Choices for Parents**

Parents of children in low-performing schools have new options under *No Child Left Behind*. In schools that do not meet state standards for at least two consecutive years, parents may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. The district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. Also, students who attend a persistently dangerous school or are the victim of a violent crime while in their school have the option to attend a safe school within their district. (retrieved 8/11/09 from <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html>)

Additionally, NCLB “requires that 95% of students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school be assessed through standardized tests aligned with ‘challenging academic standards’ in math, reading and (beginning in 2007-2008) science (Department of Education, 2003)” and

that “each year, an increasing percentage of student are to demonstrate ‘proficiency’, until 2014, at which time for all states and every school, all students (regardless of ability or proficiency, whether they have a disability or recently immigrated to the United States and are English language learners) are expected to be proficient in every subject (Hursh, 2007, p. 296).”

Before dissecting the language of the four pillars of NCLB, it is important to note that NCLB is not the sole ownership of conservatives or Republicans. Not only was it passed with broad bi-partisan support in the House and Senate (Hursh, 2007), but it is also just the most recent example of federal educational legislation attempting to confront issues of accountability, testing and measurement and educational aims. Indeed, NCLB is actually the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was signed into law by President Johnson, a Democrat. The ESEA was essentially anti-poverty legislation as it provided funding for improved educational programs for educationally underserved children, and as Spring (2005) puts it:

In general, the ESEA followed in the tradition of federal involvement in education that had been evolving since World War II. The basic thread was planning for the use of human resources in the national economy. In the 1950s, under pressure from the technological and scientific race with the Soviet Union, emphasis had been placed on channeling talented youth into higher education. In the early 1960s, the emphasis shifted to providing equality of opportunity as a means of utilizing the poor as human resources. (p. 393)

The Goals 2000 Educate America Act is the immediate precursor to NCLB, and while first proposed by President George H.W. Bush, a Republican, was ultimately enacted and signed by President Clinton, a Democrat. Though Clinton removed the elements of this legislation that pandered to the religious right, he kept the core elements of it which called for increased achievement testing in ‘essential’ subjects with students to be measured by “world class standards”. Additionally, Goals 2000 along with the School-to-Work Opportunities Act continued the strengthening of the bond between education and business “by emphasizing the importance of educating workers for competition in international trade (Spring, 2005, p. 456).” Interestingly, it can be argued that Democrats have done more than Republicans to crystallize the strength of the bond between economic concerns and education because they traditionally remove any notion of blurring the lines between private

and public education, issues of school prayer, vouchers and any other policies that have religious implications.

Returning to the present, the language of NCLB represents the interests of many educational stakeholders, while ultimately being an overwhelmingly pro-business, economics-concerned piece of legislation. For example, “close the achievement gap” appeals to supporters of social and educational equity for ethnically, racially, socioeconomically and gender diverse students, and “more freedom for states and communities” and “choice” appeal to conservatives who have longed for state and local control of education policy decisions and the return of religious teachings and practices to the public school setting. Ultimately, however, the policy proposals within NCLB are clearly geared toward business and economic competitiveness. President Bush said as much while giving a speech in 2006:

NCLB is an important way to make sure America remains competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We’re living in a global world. See, the education system must compete with education systems in China and India. If we fail to give our students the skills necessary to compete in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the jobs will go elsewhere. That’s just a fact of life. It’s the reality of the world we live in. And therefore, now is the time for the United States of America to give our children the skills so that the jobs will stay here. (Department of Education, 2006, p. 2 in Hursh, 2007, p. 297)

It should also come as no surprise that the passage of NCLB marked the biggest effort by corporate lobbyists in educational legislation history. As Hoff (2006) points out, “That year [2001], the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce formed a coalition of 50 other business groups and individual companies to support key elements of the legislation (p. 3)” and such a coalition is already being formed to ward off in any significant changes being made during NCLB’s reauthorization.

Although still early on in the presidency of Barack Obama, it would appear that while some educational reform will certainly be undertaken while he is in office, most notably increased funding by the federal government at all levels of public education and possible attempts to broaden the core curriculum, that our education policies, particularly NCLB, will continue to feed the goals of major industry through improving our competitive balance within the global marketplace. President Obama made his goals for education known during his February 24, 2009 Address to Congress:

The...challenge we must address is the urgent need to expand the promise of education in America. In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity. It is pre-requisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, and yet just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrial nation, and half of the students who begin college never finish. This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to complete and competitive education, from the day they are born to the day they begin a career. That is a promise we have to make to the children of America.(Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) on March 2, 2009)

President Obama continues his educational message by couching his goals in the language of social equity, personal development and patriotism, but the economic purpose remains:

That is why this budget creates new teachers—new incentives for teacher performance, pathways for advancement, and rewards for success. We'll invest—we'll invest in innovative programs that are already helping schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps. And we will expand our commitment to charter schools. It is our responsibility as lawmakers and as educators to make this system work, but it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in it. So tonight I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself; it's quitting on your country. And this country needs and values the talents of every American. (Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) on March 2, 2009)

At this point it should be clear that economic factors have played a role in education policy and curriculum decisions throughout the history of education in the United States, but that over the past couple of decades economic factors have become the driving force behind educational policy and curricular change regardless of our leaders political affiliation. The assumptions underlying this economic push into education are that improving scholastic attainment will lead to greater individual and societal economic rewards (Anyon, 2005), and that greater individual and societal economic rewards will lead to improved quality of life or happiness for the citizenry.



## Narrative of Findings

Seven major themes related to perceived quality of life were developed in this study through the coding of nine participants' oral history interviews. Each participant viewed his or her own quality of life as good or better, and as such, having a positive relationship to each theme can be viewed as contributing to a high quality of life, while having a negative relationship to a theme can be viewed as hampering a high quality of life. The seven themes, listed in order of their strength and importance in relation to quality of life, are Interpersonal Relationships, Engagement, Internal Motivation/Personality, Adversity, Financial Security, Occupational Identity and Faith. Two of these themes, Internal Motivation/Personality and Faith, though important to overall well-being will not be discussed here because of the difficulties in relating them to education policies. Internal Motivation/Personality is best regarded as a likely innate quality and if it is acted upon by external factors, these factors were not uncovered given the nature of this study. Faith will not be discussed because United States' law does not, at least technically, allow for the inclusion of religious or faith-based teachings. While some of the participants did discuss the importance of non-religious faith, this is still a gray area for United States' education law.

The table below briefly describes the quantitative findings of this study. Included in the table are the seven major themes with a brief description of each theme's subthemes, the number of participants who reported on each theme and the number of instances each theme was mentioned.

Table 2. Quality of Life Themes

Theme	Number of Participants	Number of Thematic References
Interpersonal Relationships (family, friends, adult, community, cultural identity)	9	167
Engagement (community, volunteering, creative, physical activity, culture experience, general group membership)	8	121

Theme	Number of Participants	Number of Thematic References
Internal Motivation/Personality (for success in education, occupation, personal control, personal life)	8	76
Adversity (overcoming viewed as positive, not overcoming viewed as negative)	8	39
Financial Security (having enough money, not being rich)	8	21
Occupation (fit, sense of purpose, achievement, sense of identity, pay)	7	51
Faith (religious, non-religious)	6	33

Interpersonal relationships proved to be the most recalled and described theme that this study found in relation to quality of life. All nine participants mentioned interpersonal relationships a combined total of 167 unique instances throughout the course of the interviewing process. Many participants mentioned several different types of relationships, including relationships with family, friends, adult, community and cultural groups. Among these, relationships with family proved the most significant with all nine participants mentioning the importance of some form of family relationship a total of 104 times. Brian, in discussing his father, gives a good example of a positive familial relationship:

I had a really good relationship with my dad growing up, a real good one. He was funny. He had a great sense of humor. My brothers and I would get Madd Magazine and dad would read them and he would crack up and you know, we thought it was so great that our dad reads Mad Magazine and that he laughs and thinks its great. And he would, we would play baseball games and stuff, and he was always there. He was a really good dad in that he was there for you at all the really important things.

Interpersonal relationships appear to serve a fundamental need for these participants to feel connected to others and to have others to rely on and also to be relied on or to feel needed. Hadley makes the case for this role of interpersonal relationships in discussing her family and friends:

I have always been the type of person who loves to be surrounded by friends and family. I think that provides some level of security for me.

There is very rarely a time when I want to be alone. There are times when I am like, I want to be alone. But not very often. I could just hang out with people all the time...So I think now I am older with a family, I just think that being close and being sure that not only my family, but my friends know that I care about them and that I would always be there for them and that a really close relationship is important for me.

Engagement was the next most well-regarded quality of life theme, with engagement through community, volunteerism, creativity and physical activity being most often discussed. There is a great deal of overlap between engagement and interpersonal relationships, as they both tend to involve interaction between individuals or groups, but engagement appears to deal less with psychological considerations and more with intellectual, moral, physical and social needs. Hadley describes the positive creative, intellectual and social impact sports and music had on her as a child:

I had fun. I think it broadens you and helps socially, you know, you meet kids. I think socially, especially when you are little. When you play soccer a lot of it is learning to share, learning to work with others, learning to interact with other kids, I mean come on you are not going to be Olympians at five, right? So you are just out there learning how to interact. And then also developmentally, playing sports, playing music, anything artistic, you know it draws on different parts of the brain I think, makes you think differently, taps into your creative side.

Louise extends this point in discussing the rhythm in music has infected the way she views the world around her:

To tell you the truth, it is strange, but I've come to realize that rhythm is really what I am very good at. And whether that has to do with the fact that I have always been physically active and have a good ear, I think the combination has made me very sensitive to rhythms. Which I hear in nature and all kind of things. It is very personal.

Overcoming adversity proved to be a very important theme for a number of the participants in achieving a high quality of life. It also appears that during times when participants were not yet able to overcome their adversity, they perceived their quality of life as low. What caused adversity was different for each participant and could be as generally recognizable as anything from setbacks at school or work to childhood sexual abuse. Gayle describes how she was able to confront and begin to overcome her abuse:

He [a psychologist] started seeing me three times a week and he got me to talking, but first he said 'I want you to yell'. And he said 'I am going to tell the guards to just let you scream', so I started screaming. And from yelling and stuff, he said 'I want you to write', and he said one day, 'you are not going to believe this, but you are going to be a writer', and then I started writing. And he said 'I want you to just write a letter to your mother and tell her all the abuse that happened and then ask her to come up here to visit you'. She won't hit you or abuse you, and he showed me all of the guards downstairs and whatever. And it took awhile, but I did it. I got the most help, I think out of all of my childhood, there.

It is also important to note that at times these themes can overlap. April describes her challenges in overcoming a series of deaths of people close to her, and how the strengthening of her interpersonal relationships with her family contributed to her ultimate success:

There was a ten year span of time when just everyone I knew, somebody in some shape or form of our family, died. It wasn't, obviously, good, but I think my whole family banded together and got through it. And it made us all stronger and we talked about it a lot, talked through it a lot. I think it just kind of helped me put things in perspective and still to this day helps me put things in perspective, so I am really grateful for everything that I have, and so many people have things way less than I did, and way worse circumstances than I did. I just feel like I was given a really good life, and I think I have done a good job with myself. I am trying to be a good person, and there are obviously things that I could have done better and that I would change if given the opportunity. But I kind of think that everything happens for a reason. I don't kind of think, I think that everything happens for a reason. I am okay with it. Life is good.

The next theme the participants related to their perceived quality of life was financial security. Interestingly, every participant who mentioned financial security made it clear that being rich was not an objective or a need. And while every participant may have a differing interpretation of how much money is 'enough', this is a telling admission. Hadley describes this view:

Certainly financially [is important to quality of life], I think everybody likes things, but I just want security, I don't want to ever live where I didn't feel like I could pay the bills. So that is a function of happiness for me; that I live within my means and I feel comfortable and secure.

David and Cheryl demonstrate another interesting component to financial security, which is that while financial security is desired, it is not as strong a pull on quality of life as some other factors. David states:

I don't really think about money to tell you the truth. And its probably because I have enough, and I don't have a lot of needs. I am not very material. But I have a nice car and my apartment is perfectly nice and I play at a private golf club, so I have a lot of nice things. But, so I guess it is tied to money to some extent, but I think it is more 'am I happy with who I am, and who my friends are, if I have good relationships with my family'.

Cheryl reiterates David's notion on family and relationships, while also factoring in issues of health in putting financial security in its place:

You could be very financially well off not have a care in the world, in terms of finances, totally where you want to be on track for retirement or goals or whatever, and be in a very unhappy or dysfunctional or unsatisfying relationship. Whether that's with a spouse or partner, it could even be with your children, or a parent or a sibling. To me they go together, like the material and fiscal aspects of life as well as your mental and physical well-being. You know, if you're well off, but you have cancer, I guess being well off makes it more comfortable, but ideally you would like to not have cancer because you can enjoy life better.

The last theme, occupational identity, is closely tied to financial security. Brian recognizes this relationship, while also putting his occupation in its place in relation to the rest of his life. He states:

Well, it [his job] is important to me because it is, obviously, my major source of income, but I never felt like I was one of those people who is married to their job. I like to leave work at work and I feel like my whole life is much more than just my job and who I am at my job.

Brian was not alone in having the perspective that occupation is important for financial considerations, while maintaining the importance of not having one's whole life wrapped up in one's employment. There were, however, other considerations outside of finances. Cheryl explains:

Work doesn't stress me anymore. I stopped stressing out about work when I left P&G because it consumed my life. I was physically sick from the stress and I just said I won't do it. I mean I work hard, but if it out of my hands, out of my control, I don't take it home. I don't think about work at home until the alarm clock goes off. I just leave it here.

For some participants, however, occupation and occupational success play a larger role in perceived quality of life. They receive a great of satisfaction out of a job well-done and actively enjoy what they are doing in their occupations. Even for these participants, though it is clear that other considerations, usually familial interpersonal relationships, still trump occupational success. Hadley describes this relationship and how she balances it:

I really like GE [General Electric]. I think it is a great company. I love what I am doing. I think ultimately I want to have more of a leadership role where I have a team of people working for me, and I can drive strategy. I mean my job right now is very strategic so that is fun. But we'll see. That is always a balance. With more responsibility it means more time, so I always try to keep things in check with what I have at home with my family and at work.

In the next section these findings will be examined in relation to the economic model of schooling described earlier and to prominent constructs dealing with quality of life and the aims of education.

## **Discussion**

To this point, it has been shown that the American educational system has historically included economic considerations when making policy and curriculum decisions. It is also clear that in recent decades and into the foreseeable future, economic considerations, both personal and societal, have become of paramount importance to our education policymakers. Through the findings presented above, however, it is clear that while economic indicators like financial security and occupational identity are generally important to individuals, there are more important components that are perceived to create a high quality of life. There are a number of scholars working on elements of the relationship described here between education and quality of life. I will briefly discuss two, economist Robert E. Lane's conceptualization of quality of life and education researcher Nel Noddings' theory for educating the whole child.

Robert E. Lane is a political scientist and economist who quickly realized the finite boundaries of power that market economies, like that of the United States, had in achieving happiness for its citizenry. Lane never abandoned economics or its language in his forays into quality of life research, but he did not overstate its place. In developing his theory, Lane

has borrowed from many major fields of study, including philosophy, psychology, sociology and economics to form one quality of life theory that examines the full person. The philosophical underpinnings of this theory borrow heavily from both Aristotle and Mill, while declaring neither scholar's theory to be conclusive in determining quality of life. From economics and Mill, Lane pulls heavily from the principles of marginal utility, and in doing so shows that simple economic indicators (i.e. income) do not reflect the full balance of a quality life. He refers to this as the "*economistic fallacy* (p. 104)." From psychology and sociology, he demonstrates the necessity for measuring subjective well-being as a key component of quality of life, while denoting its definite limits, particularly in relation to poor social and economic conditions.

In pulling all of these disciplinary thoughts together Lane has created eight elements of a theory of quality of life. He states:

If I may be permitted to borrow the language of Jefferson, I hold these truths to be self-evident:

(1) that people have multiple sources of happiness and satisfaction and will seek a variety of goods in their pursuits of happiness;

(2) that (above the poverty level) the goods that contribute most to happiness, such as companionship and intrinsic work enjoyment, are not priced, do not pass through the market, and [less obviously] have inadequate shadow prices;

(3) that as any one good becomes relatively more abundant the satisfaction people get from that good usually [but not universally] wanes in relation to the satisfaction they get from other goods. (Schumpeter called this proposition an "axiom" rather than a psychological hypothesis);

(4) that, therefore, when people and societies become richer, they will receive declining satisfaction from each new unit of income and increasing satisfaction from such other goods as companionship and intrinsic work satisfaction;

(5) that, as a corollary to propositions 3 and 4, when companionship is abundant, its power to yield satisfaction will also diminish compared to the power of money;

(6) that, as historical and social circumstances change, the power of the various available goods (e.g., income, companionship, work satisfaction) to yield satisfaction will

change with the changes in the supply of each good (as well as with changing taste);

(7) and that any assessment of the quality of life must be governed by these “self-evident” truths.

(8) that in assessing quality of life, the SWB of the people living those lives is not, by itself, an adequate measure of its quality. (p. 104–105)

Lane then uses these ‘truths’ as the underpinnings for formulating his definition of quality of life, or perhaps more accurately, for describing the component pieces, and the relationship between those component pieces, that go into achieving a high quality of life. He states, “I believe there are *three* ultimate, coordinate goods: subjective well-being, human development (including virtue) and justice, no one of which may be resolved into or subordinated under another (p. 110).”

Lane has embraced the practical importance of monetary security without overstating its value to the individual or the society in which that individual lives; he has stated that subjective well-being is also valuable, but cannot be fully understood unless it places the individual’s sentiments about his or her own life, into the social and cultural context in which that individual lives; and finally, it embraces the notion that while it is of great importance for the individual to achieve well-being in his or her own life, that individual cannot be experiencing a truly high quality of life, if the world around the individual is unjust. This final concept can be as large-scale as the effects of global warming and the war in Iraq to racial strife in Hungary. Lane has created a theory that echoes Aristotle, but adds some practicality. This theory understands that to assess quality of life, one must examine all the facets of our species’ existence that make us human.

In the results of this study all three of these coordinate goods are on display with the Engagement and Interpersonal Relationships themes probably doing the best jobs of confronting all three goods, while most of the other themes, including Financial Security and Occupational Identity, generally confront two of three coordinate goods. The Engagement theme in particular ardently supports Lane’s notion that to fully achieve a good life one cannot only be concerned with one’s self. Jonas illustrates this point. He went to a very wealthy, highly-regarded high school in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. The majority of the children who went there were the sons and daughters of the Cincinnati elite, though Jonas was only able to



go there because his father taught there. He describes his disbelief at how little these rich and powerful people did to help others:

But my social justice point, what shocked me about it...I get angry about social justice issues and I didn't see a lot of good work being done by those families and that was weird to me because I grew up in this, again, this sort of Sisters of Charity, Jesuit tradition, like everybody did social justice work. And these guys weren't and they had all the authority and it was bizarre to me.

April furthers Lane's point on helping others by viewing it as a negative part of her life that she is not helping others more:

I feel like I am doing my part, I am helping deaf kids learn to talk, so I feel like that is nice and it is a nice duty to fill for society, but at the same time I feel like there is other stuff that I can do, there is time for me to go to a hospital and volunteer. I do feel guilty about it...I still feel bad.

If Robert E. Lane is the theoretician who brought the varied philosophical perspectives and singular disciplinary research together for quality of life research, Nel Noddings is one of the main forces in applying this concept to formal education. Noddings has long been a proponent of educating the 'Whole Child.' An education with this as its focus would address not only the academic needs of a child, but also the "physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims (p. 10)" that a child may have, and that we should not compartmentalize these curricular goals into different subjects, but instead have them incorporated into every lesson and every class (Noddings 2005, 2005b, 2006). These aims clearly fall in line with the results reported in this paper.

Noddings argues that there is currently a major push for an academics-only focus to the educational process, but that that falls out of line with the traditional goals of education in this and other countries, and that it is a mistake to continue to push the agenda to the disadvantage of the Whole Child (Noddings, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Noddings (2006) states, "Students need to know how schooling is related to real life, how today's learning objective fits into their own interests and plans, and even whether there is any meaning to life itself (p. 154)." Louise echoes Noddings sentiments

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the Historical Context section for a full discussion of the traditional and current aims of education in the United States.

while lamenting some of the changes currently occurring in public schools:

Well, they take away the librarians, they take away the clubs, they take away the sports. All the things that are the socializing mechanisms that schools need are things we will take away from you if you don't pass the levy. And then because experts, expert in sports and expert in this and expert in that became very important, but most of the people got pushed off to the side and are not participants. We have kind of professionalized children's lives and opportunities, which is not a good thing. So exploration, your own definition of what learning is about are not things that I see happening. Now it is meet the test. Meet the grade. Get through. And I think there is a lot of mischief going on.

Flowing from this pursuit of educating the Whole Child, Noddings theorized that happiness should be a main aim of the educational process. Ultimately, Noddings is a perfect companion to Lane because her operationalization of happiness—even though I disagree with her language usage—is essentially the same as Lane's operationalized definition of Quality of Life. Still, I think it valuable to spend a little time exploring Noddings' 'happiness' in her words. She begins by stating that neither objective nor subjective measurements are sufficient in assessing happiness. She (2004) states:

It seems obvious that a judgment of happiness is best made by the person who claims or disavows happiness...[W]e cannot credibly say that someone is happy if that person says that she is not. Thus, SWB or something like it is essential for those studying happiness.

However, there are objective features of happiness, and these have long been recognized. Even Aristotle acknowledged that health, wealth, reputation, friends, freedom from worry and fear and certain sensual pleasures play a role in happiness. It is unlikely that people who are desperately poor or miserably ill would claim to be happy. But surveys have shown repeatedly that increased wealth, beyond the relief of poverty, does not often bring with it greater happiness. (p. 22)

To this Noddings (2004) adds:

We cannot be entirely satisfied with an objective description because it seems soulless; it misses something vital at the heart of the concept. The subjective is indeed built into the concept. If it is carried to extremes, however, the subjective loses touch with reality as it appears in everyday life. (p. 25)

Combined with this assertion that both objective and subjective elements of life contribute to happiness, Noddings also feels that the meeting of needs and some wants is essential to achieving happiness (2004). Obviously, basic biological or 'survival' needs must be met, but Noddings also addresses two other types of needs to be met, expressed needs and inferred needs, when reasonable, to aid a happy life. Expressed needs are "those needs that arise within the one who needs. Such needs may be verbally expressed or, unarticulated, they may be expressed through forms of body language (Noddings, 2004, p. 58)." Expressed needs may not concern issues of life or death, which leads to the potentially semantic, potentially philosophical query as to whether expressed needs are actually 'wants'. Regardless of the conclusion one draws on this distinction Noddings (2004) argues, "In contemporary Western societies, it seems right to say that the satisfaction of some wants is itself a basic need (p. 62)", and that if these expressed needs or wants are attainable, perhaps with assistance, not harmful and remain constant over an extended period of time that they should be met as they will contribute to overall happiness.

Inferred needs are those needs that are deemed good for an individual (or perhaps a group of school children), but are not expressed by that individual. Examples of this might include brushing one's teeth, getting enough sleep and eating well, but we must be careful with inferred needs because we run the risk of coercion, or putting our beliefs or needs onto another (Noddings, 2004). One person's acceptable shelter is another's hovel. Ultimately the message to be taken away from both expressed and inferred needs is that needs and thus, happiness, can be highly individualized, which adds another layer in examining both objective and subjective measures.

Bringing the conversation back to education, Noddings breaks up educating for happiness into two fundamental parts, education for personal life and education for public life. Briefly stated, education for personal life includes training in making a home, developing a sense of place and a relationship with nature, parenting skills, character and spirituality, and interpersonal growth or relationships, and education for public life includes training in work preparation and training in understanding and taking part in our community, democracy, and service. These are precisely the attributes attributed to achieving a high quality of life according to the participants in this study. One of the participants, April, a teacher herself, takes a hopeful eye to a sad situation in echoing

the call for the training Noddings describes above, particularly in relation to educating for personal life, while also summing up what the majority of the participants needed for a high quality of life:

I think some school systems are starting to get the idea that kids need more social and emotional help in school, like figuring out what to do when a kid is not nice to you. It is not okay to just beat up a kid. What can you talk about, what can you say to the kid, what can you say to your parents, how do you work through those things, without using violence or without using bad words... Yeah, I think there a lot of things that are not built into curriculum that should be. That being the social emotional piece being important. Like coping skills. What to do when you are sad. What do to when somebody dies. Like all of those emotional things that are brought up that for some reason people don't talk about, and teachers are scared to go there with kids I think know, because there are so many rules, and the dynamics of a teacher/child relationship have changed so much. It is sad, but I think those kind of pieces should be part of curriculum.

Clearly further, more large-scale research endeavors must be undertaken to assess exactly what factors contribute to a quality life and exactly what formal schooling contributes to achieving that quality life, and while no one, including Lane and Noddings is calling for an end to economic considerations in formal schooling, it also seems clear that some serious discussions need to be had concerning the policies maintaining the United States current economic model of schooling and whether those policies are ultimately doing the children of the United States a disservice.

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